promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which here in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"


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## The Place of The Church in Rural Work

By Rev. J. C. B. Singh*

For the past fourteen years, I have been in Christian work in the rural areas of Bastar State, India, and what I am about to present is the result of personal experience. I feel that the Church should be central in the Christian programme in the rural areas. Its influence and leadership must be felt in all areas of life. The first sphere of rural life for which the Church should minister is the health of the home and of the community.

In our district, we have tried through our Rural Training Centre to set up a programme in every village to insure general cleanliness, to dig manure pits, to have a small medicine box with every preacher-in-charge and with other workers who know how to administer medicines, and help people locally in cases of ordinary diseases and to make arrangements to send serious cases to the hospital. In every circuit Health Week is observed once a year. Throughout the week, people attend magic lantern lectures and addresses on health given for the occasion. Every home is encouraged to have a vegetable garden. This year, small fruit trees were distributed in this programme.

The second sphere of village life in which the church should be central is the economic condition of our rural people. There is no reason why our people should be in want if they are true followers of our Lord Jesus Christ who has freed them from fear and superstition and ignorance which were sapping their life blood. The average non-Christian villager spends, in a year, one-fourth of his earnings on witch doctors and the money lender.

Most Christians are either weavers or farmers or both. By observation we have found that those farmers who have weaving as a supplementary

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*Rev. J. C. B. Singh is District Superintendent of The Methodist Church in Jagdalpur, Bastar State. This paper was presented at the National Conference of the Christian Rural Fellowship of India. It is presented to the members of the World Christian Rural Fellowship because of the lucid manner in which Mr. Singh discusses issues which are of major importance today both in India and in the world at large. Used with the kind permission of the author and of the India Christian Rural Fellowship.

occupation are well off, but the exclusive farmer or weaver is always in want. Here again our Rural Training Centre plays a very important role in showing the farmer better ways of cultivation, (such as the conservation of his manure through compost making) and in teaching better weaving methods with improved looms. The idea of co-operation is also being fostered and there are scattered cases where farmers have helped each other in ploughing when cattle died and there was a great scarcity of draught animals. Weavers in general help each other. An Annual Exhibition where garden products and handicrafts and the like are shown and prizes given is helping to enlarge the interests and efforts of the villager.

The third sphere where the Church should be central is in education. By education I mean useful everyday working education, not decoration. We have found by experience that the day school is a waste of money and time in the rural areas, unless the economic condition of the villager is much improved. He needs all hands at work in the fields or craft to eke out his and his family's meager living. Still, there is a dull season in the rural areas. In our part of the country that is the period between January and April when most of the crop is gathered and there is a gap before the sowing season. Spring has come and there is an inclination to be lazy.

During this period, we have schools which are known as Three-Month-Schools. The goal of the school is to take the community as a whole, men, women and children of school-going age, and educate them. The school is organized to serve all areas of life and projects dealing with health, language and arithmetic skills, crafts, social and recreational opportunities. These schools are not thrust upon the group, but are opened upon invitation from the village. In the month of October, the matter is presented and those villages which avail themselves of the opportunity are requested to provide accommodation for the school and the teacher whom we shall send. They report by the last week in December if the place is ready. These places may vary from a cowshed or a mango tope to a first class village guest house.

The programme of the school is planned with everyone in mind. Usually teachers are sent two by two. If possible, we try to get a husband and wife. Children are free in the morning while mothers are engaged in cooking and fathers are busy elsewhere. So the children are taught in the morning. After feeding the family, the women are free in the early afternoon, so they are taught during that period. The men and bigger boys come at night when the work is over. For three months the school becomes the centre of activity and interest for the village.

On the closing day, there are sports and other celebrations with prizes, given for attendance, good work, cleanliness etc. This along with Play Day which is planned during the school period, and an occasional drama, enriches the otherwise drab life of the village. And in this way the Church through its all-round programme ministers to another sphere of life, the social and recreational life of the village. Where we have had these short-term schools consecutively for five years, we have found a great change for good coming into the whole of the community. The village and the people are clean, there are fewer problems brought before the panchayat (council of village elders), people take part intelligently in the worship, and the church attendance is marvellous. In situations like these the Church grows, and in turn it uplifts the rural community.

## The Strength of the Church

In order to sponsor a programme of this kind, the Church must be full of hope and vitality. Its vitality will depend upon:

(1) Faith in the rural Way of Life. The person who is at work in the village should not be there because the bishop of some Council has sent him there, but because he feels the urge in him to go and because he has the conviction that the only way to lift the villager is to live with him and work with him. He must feel that farming and the occupations of the villager are God-given tasks and the performing of them ennobling and sacred. Then he will be able to lead the Rural Church into new life.

(2) Faith in Christianity as a Way of Life affecting all of Life, the whole of man. We are taking a short-sighted view of the richness of life if we try to save the soul of man and allow his body to remain covered with the filth of social and economic ills. I feel we need a philosophy of Christian living which will consider the whole man, his needs and his environment. But even when we have our philosophy formulated, it is a very different matter to go and do something about it. So often we fail to make the practical approach to the people among whom we are privileged to work. We find it much easier to preach and teach than to get down to brass tacks and do something about solving their problems. Jesus met all man's needs and we must seek to do the same.

(3) Leadership with a vision. It is natural for even an enthusiast to get into a rut if things do not go according to his way of thinking or progress rapidly enough. The village is a place where things will not happen overnight. The final goal must not be obscured though progress be slow and the rut, the easy way of life, too often followed. There should always be the far look, the clearly defined objectives, the vision of what is to be.

(4) A programme integrated into the life of the village. Nothing foreign should be thrust upon the people nor should the programme be dependent on someone from the outside lest it work as long as the person is present and then dies with him when he leaves.

From where are we to get such leaders and so many? The all-India rural area is tremendous. Leaders will come from the theological colleges, agricultural institutes, and special training centres. But these are not enough. Not only are they too few in numbers, but they have their handicaps. Most of them cannot work without four or five secondary grade workers to help them. We need local leaders, the people of the soil, already engaged in farming, earning their livelihood, born in the village and to be buried there. We have them all over India. These are the men we must use.

## Training Local Leaders

Local leaders must be trained for their work, so every year in the month of March or April when rural people are free to come away from their village they are called to an institute. From all over the district they gather for one week and are given intensive training. This has been going on now for eleven years and last March we had 106 attending the institute.

The courses followed in their training have been:

(a) The enrichment of personal religious life. For this there are the early personal devotions and then group devotions when all come together and are led in worship by an able leader, and also the night evangelistic meetings.

(b) The mastery of materials of worship, e.g., The Lord's Prayer, Beatitudes, Psalms, songs and choruses which they shall be using in their daily and Sunday worship services.

(c) Methods of work. In this they are taught how to conduct simple services of worship, engagements, burials and other services.

(d) Social Service. In this work they have been taught sanitation, village uplift, the administration of simple remedies and methods of adult literacy work.

(e) Handicrafts including brick making, tile and rope making, bamboo work and leather work. We have some local leaders who have made tiles for their own houses and have earned money in their off time by making and selling tiles.

The list of duties of the local leaders in their respective villages has been outlined and impressed upon them from time to time. They conduct daily worship services. They prepare seekers for baptism. They collect the pastor's fund and look after the upkeep and cleanliness of the worship place. They witness for the Master by conduct and by preaching as they find time during and after their work. It is expected that their conduct will be exemplary in all things, they are to give according to their ability to the church and participate in the Lord's Acre plan and such other aspects of the life of the church as planned. These unpaid workers are of great help to the pastor and the real builders of the Church of Christ in Bastar State.

To conclude I may say that the building of the Rural Church is an uphill job, but not an impossible one. Why, in general, is the rural church behind? Because usually more attention is given to the urban church, for the city with its large Christian institutions has a great appeal to the average person. We also know that the cream of the young people is drawn to the city, leaving the village community all the poorer. It is high time that more attention be given to the Rural Church. The Rural Church is the real Church of Christ in India. It is the measuring rod by which the success or failure of the church shall be determined. If it has a programme based upon meeting the needs of the people in all spheres of life, and if it is built upon a leadership which is indigenous to the village, the Rural Church will move forward, and the rural community will be blessed through its ministrations.